DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 752 CG 017 880

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TITLE Foundations of Phenomenological Psychology.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (30th, New Orleans, LA, March 28-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Sciences; Experience; Interdisciplinary Approach; Natural Sciences; *Phenomenology; *Psychology; *Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Meaningfulness

ABSTRACT

Phenomenology, hermeneutics and experiential psychology form the backbone of an emerging paradigm within psychology known as human science. Human science's use of phenomenology provides a way to set aside the naturalistic presupposition and directly study the irreducible involvement of human existence within a meaningful world, as it is given in immediate experience. Traditional psychology's natural science basis leads to the occlusion of meaning. The genetic perspective holds that human involvement in the world is not related to any intrinsic meaning, but is determined by inherited instincts. According to physiological psychology, emotion is casued by changes occurring in the body. Behaviorist theory assumes psychological life is the effect of random associations of impinging stimuli. In cognitive psychology, processed bits of information have replaced stimuli as the efficient reality on which psychological reality is founded. For phenomenological psychology, the fundamental psychological reality is human being in-the-world. Phenomenological research aims to discover the significance of psychological phenomena by studying its occurrance in everyday experience. It does this by obtaining naive descriptions from subjects and explicating the essential structure of the experience. The term human science was selected to connote an umbrella-like unity across different disciplines as well as across technical diversities at the level of method. The unifying factor is the recognition that human existence needs to be approached on its own terms, rather than on conceptual foundations borrowed from natural science. (LLL)

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ED251752

FOUNDATIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Christopher M. Aanstoos
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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA, March 29-31, 1984.

CG 017880

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Foundations of Phenomenological Psychology

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans
March 1984

Welcome to this symposium on innovative approaches within psychology. We'll be speaking today about phenomenology, hermeneutics, and experiential psychology. These three approaches form the backbone of an emerging paradigm within psychology known as "human science". To begin to grasp the significance of this term, you may contrast it with such labels as "behavioral science" or "cognitive science." Fundamentally, however, it is meant to indicate a distinction with "natural science." For too long, psychology has uncritically borrowed conceptual foundations from the natural sciences. Accordingly, psychological life was presumed to be objectivistic, deterministic, mechanistic, linear, causal. Basically, psychological phenomena were considered merely epiphenomenal - that is, derivative from prior non-psychological factors, be they genes, biochemicals, stimuli, or information. Such naturalistic assumptions were not critically examined. Rather, they were presupposed by a psychology eager to achieve stature through imitation of the natural sciences. These presuppositions supported the project of constructing explanatory laws through the use of experimental methodology - natural science's most potent investigatory tool. Rmember, it was from Wundt's establishment of his experimental laboratory that psychology dates its start as an independent discipline. So, adopting these naturalistic assumptions allowed psychology to establish a frame of reference it considered important. But what was the price of this establishment? The most basic consequence was to foreclose the alternative project of understanding the meaningfulness of psychological reality in its own right. Rather than approaching the intrinsically meaningful coherence of our experience as we live it, natural scientific psychology preconceives this meaningfulness to be the merely extrinsic effect of external causes. Through such a preconception, the psycholcgical field as an original upsurge of meaning is occluded, and so forfeited.

Against the ground of this tradition, the human science approach present a fundamentally different alternative for psychology. It's use of phenomenology provides a

way to set aside the naturalistic presupposition, and directly study the irreducible involvement of human existence with a meaningful world, as it is given in immediate experience. That alternative will be the theme of my presentation today, which I'll elaborate in three parts. First, I'll review the role of reductionism in natural scientific psychology. Second, I'll outline the essential contribution of phenomenology to the framework of a human science alternative. Third, I'll describe some recent development regarding the actual evolution of the human science paradigm.

Turning to the first point, I'd like to briefly exemplify how traditional psychology's natural science basis leads to the occlusion of meaning. My point here is that this overlooking of meaning is a necessary consequence, regardless of the specific conceptual bias taken. Whether it be genetic, physiological, behavioristic, or cognitivistic, all these points of view share the same naturalistic presupposition. Let me give a quick example from each to illustrate this point.

The genetic perspective, currently best epitomized by sociobiology, holds that human involvement in the world is not in fact related to any intrinsic meaning, but rather is completely determined by inherited instincts. Consciousness, then, is a by-product of predetermined genetic dictates. Thus, our actions do not manifest an engagement with a meaningful world, but are merely the effects of this genetic predetermination. This position is basically another form of social Darwinism, and has been around since Darwin. At that time, disputants pointed to the ability of animals to coordinate their actions with the contingencies of their milieu as contrary evidence. For instance, beavers' ability to construct elaborate dams and rechannel rivers was taken as evidence of their attunement to a world of intrinsic meaning. The geneticists argued instead that it was nothing more than "blind" instinct. Their view was subsequently supported by experiments which show that beavers will even dam up a stereo speaker if the sound of running water is played through it. Their

argument, here as elseqhere, is that our apparently meaningful engagement in the world is illusory and could be explained without recourse to meaning. I would urge, on the contrary, that this very presupposition has precluded a full understanding of the beaver's actions from emerging. Even though the experiment's use of electronic equipment distorts and disguises the presence of the water, it is still very much present as a significance to the beaver who hears it on the other side of that speaker. The water is not actually present, but it is virtually present. That is, the sound announces the imminent emergence of water. So, rather than presupposing the beaver is not attuned to the meaningfulness of his world, we should instead marvel at how primordially attuned to it he is, that he still lives out that significance even when it is present in so primitive a form. It is this most deep engagement with our world that Merleau-Ponty called the "operative intentionality" of the prereflective body-subject. This same principle is at work when people relax by listening to "mood music" that includes the sounds of waterfalls. Our relaxation reveals an attunement on a prepersonal level, one more primordial than that of reflective consciousness, but one which is just as related to meaning. In other words, meaning inheres in situations as we live them to be, not merely as we know them to be. It is this primordial level of lived meaning that phenomenological psychology aims to articulate. And it is this same level that remains obscured in natural scientific approaches. Let me continue illustrating that point by next taking an example from physiological psychology. According to that view, emotion is caused by physiological changes occurring in the body. For instance, an increase in certain biochemicals causes aggression: What is overlooked here is what it means to the person to be aggressive. Aggression is not meaningless. It manifests and expresses a meaning that the person is experiencing and living out in the aggressiveness. Note, I am not saying that the biochemical changes are not real. What I am saying is that an explanation on those terms misses the psychological significance of the event. Yet in a peculiar way, it takes this significance for

granted in its very overlooking of it. For of course the biochemical changes themselves are certainly not random. It is no accident that they occur in situation A and not in situation B. Again, even at the level of the living, pre-personal body, we are in the realm of meaning. As psychologists we never leave it. My argument is we need to make it explicit rather than take it for granted. To do otherwise is to effect a strange dualism: a split between psyche and body in which meaning is allowed to inhere in biochemicals but not in people. This view leads to the silly conclusion that "I'm not feeling emotional, just my biochemicals are." Anyone who would seriously assert that would be considered neurotic. Basically then, this physiological reductionism offers us a neurotic model of human existence.

But behaviorist theory is no better. Here psychological life is assumed to be the effect of random associations of impinging stimuli - unseen forces constantly bombarding us and determining our every move, thought, and feeling. Meaning is considered a mere epiphenomenal illusion of this causal conditioning process. In this view, a romantic mood has no significance beyond the conditioned stimulus of the wattage of the dim lights, etc. The invitational and seductive meaning of meeting in semi-darkness is not explored. But why not? It's this meaning that gives the conditioned stimulus, "dim lights," its power. There is, after all, no point at which intimate semi-darkness is meaningless. It is always already shot through with significance. If a person were to say that their life had no meaning, that they were simply driven by unseen, unknowable forces to respond in ways that had no intrinsic sense, we would feel very sorry for that person. Indeed, we would say they were neurotic. Again, when psychology attempts to displace meaning from the heart of psychological life, it presents only neurotic caricatures of human existence.

My final example of this point is cognitive psychology. Where behaviorism asserted that psychological life could be modelled by a rat, pigeon or worm, cognitivism goes one step further and does away with the requirement that the model even be alive. Computer simulation programs now proliferate with claims

to represent everything from problem solving to paranoia to psychotherapy. Processed bits of information have replaced stimuli as the efficient reality on which psychological reality is founded. Again, meaning is stripped from human existence, this time to inhere in programs. So if I experience a slip of the tongue, it's simply a computational, or data processing error, devoid of any intrinsic psychodynamic meaning. But once again this model fails us at the level of our lived experience. If someone were to say that they experience themselves as a machine, a lifeless computer routinely computing incoming bits of information we would not merely feel sorry for him, we would consider him to be schizophrenic.

Let me summarize what I've been trying to illustrate with these examples. My basic point is that if we want to understand psychological life as it is lived, then we must not reductively overlook meaning as if it were merely an after-effect of some physicalistic cause. Rather we must study that meaning directly - as it presents itself, in experience as it is lived. Phenomenology refers to that projects as going "to the things themselves" - that is, to whatever phenomena present themselves in our immediate experience. What I'd like to do next is to show how phenomenological psychology accomplishes this aim, and thereby revisions psychology from a naturalistic science to an authentically human science.

For phenomenological psychology, the fundamental psychological reality is human being-in-the-world, a term indicative of an essential relation of person and world. "Comportment," "experience," "expression," "action," "behavior," "consciousness" - these are all different names for this relation. Likewise, all the usual processes that psychology studies - perception, memory, learning, thinking, emotion, motivation - are specific modes by which people relate to the world. Phenomenology's most basic discovery is that this relation is lived as an intentional unity, a correlation of experiencer-experienced. Thus, psychologically speaking, a person is always "in relation to" or "directed toward" or "intending" something. Furthermore, by virtue of this intentional unity, that

toward which the person is directed coheres, that is, it presents itself to experience as always already meaningful in some way.

Methodologically, then, the research task of the phenomenological psychologist is to study that meaningful coherence of experience as it is lived. To do so, it must be attended to on its own terms (which was precisely the sense of Husserl's maxim "to the things themselves"). As has already been said, psychology traditionally conceived of its subject matter naturalistically. Along those lines, it viewed the subject's world as a random heap of extrinsic, impinging stimuli, to which sense was subsequently somehow added by the person. But these are terms borrowed from the physical sciences; they are not the terms by which the world is ordinarily lived by people in their everyday experience. Psychologists <u>can</u> view the world in that way, but when such a theoretically derived viewpoint is posited as that lived by the subject, then a "category error" has been committed. The researcher's <u>conception</u> of the world has been put in the place of the subject's <u>living</u> of it. The world is not lived as something foreign to the person, but as a situation carved out by one's involvements. Perhaps a specific example would help clarify this point. Cognitive psychology has now constructed computer models of thought and has applied these models to areas that require thinking - such as chess. The program of such a computer chess player is then taken as a simulation of human thought. The computer proceeds by applying pre-determined heuristic search and evaluation rules. But to mistake this conception of how chess <u>can</u> be played for an understanding of how people actually <u>do</u> think in chess is to commit the aforementioned category error, substituting the researcher's knowledge for the subject's experience.

And how does phenomenology avoid this error? First by respecting the contextualized, or situated, character of experience. Phenomenological studies generally aim to discover the significance of any psychological phenomenon by studying its occurrence in actual, everyday experience. For example, if one's research interest was perceptual thematization, then it would be more

illuminating to study it in the context of the subject's picking out groceries in a supermarket than it would be to have the subject detect randomly generated dots on an electronic screen in a laboratory. Meaning inheres in situations: stripping away the context is like throwing out the baby with the bath water. Second, phenomenological research remains faithful to experience by proceeding descriptively. It begins by obtaining naive descriptions from subjects. The data-generating questions are open-ended, designed to allow subjects to "tell their story" about specific situations in which they actually experienced the topic in question.

Nor is this descriptive emphasis compromised by the imposition of hypothetical constructs at a later step. Rather, the researcher's aim is to reflectively determine and explicate the essential structure of the experience. That is achieved by making explicit the meaningful coherence that may have been lived only prethematically, and hence described only implicitly by the subject. In that way, phenomenological research is not caught by the same dilemmas that plagued introspectionism. It does not require that subjects grasp the essential structure of their experience, only that they describe their experience as they lived it. It is properly the task of the researcher to make this structure explicit. There are already well established procedures for teasing out that which is essentially invariant in subjects' descriptions. What is sought are not merely invariant facts, but instead the invariant structure within which the individual contingencies cohere. By analogy, one may picture the grasp of this structural invariance to be similar to the way that a theme in music is grasped as that which is common to all its variations. The final step is to provide a structural description of the essential psychological significance of the experience. And therein lies the true value of phenomenological psychology. It returns, as its gift back to the lived work, as explicit understanding of that which lies closest to human being: the meaningful coherence of experience.

Lastly, I'd like to address some recent developments within psychology that signify the emergence of this human science approach. Groups of psychologists have begun working, through publications and conferences, to formulate and pursue a fundamentally different alternative than traditional psychology. Their dissatisfaction represents the latest wave of a continuing turmoil within psychology. Its roots are as old as psychology itself, since Dilthey and Brentano first proposed alternatives to the experimentalism then being developed by Wundt and Ebbinghaus. More immediately, however, the current wave of dissatisfaction, follows from the humanistic movement that swept through psychology during the 1960's. That movement was more of a protest than a decisive alternative. It argued against traditional psychology's neglect of certain topics (such as love) but failed to grasp the necessity to revise psychology's very approach. For example, researchers who accumulate statistical correlations of operationally defined variables about love remain just as blind to the meaning of the experience as did those who used the same method to study rote learning. The current dissatisfaction grasps this necessity, so its focus has been to utilize phenomenology and hermeneutics in the reformulation of psychology's foundations. This movement appears especially at recent conferences, both national and international. In the American Psychological Association, four new methodological innovations have become represented (esp. in Div. 24): descriptive psychology (Ossorio), ethnomethodology, archetypal psychology (U. Dallas), and phenomenology (Duquesne). Internationally, a conference was held last year at Perugia, Italy, called the Symposium on Qualitative Methods in Psychology, it included representatives from Marxism (Finland group), phenomenography (Swedish group) and phenomenology. Most significant has been the annual Human Science Research Conference, an annual international and interdisciplinary meeting.

Over the past few years a group of scholars from around the world has been meeting and sharing ideas, theories and research centered on the evolution

of methods and approaches which are particularly sensitive to the human sciences. This group, now known as the Human Science Research Association, began at a conference hosted by the University of Michigan two years ago on the theme "phenomenology of the child." The aim was to bring together different disciplines (pedagogy, sociology, psychology, philosophy) to bear on the theme from the life-world. It was decided then to hold such meetings annually, but rather than focus on a single theme, to take as an aim the overall development and application of the human sciences. The term "human science" was selected to connote an unbrella-like unity across different disciplines as well as across technical diversities at the level of method. What unites the group is the recognition that human existence needs to be approached on its own terms, rather than on conceptual foundations borrowed from natural sciences. Perhaps that maxim is an appropriate conclusion to my paper as well.